

[The Story of Ellen]

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LIFE HISTORY

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Fictitious Name Ellen Parkhurst

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Place Charleston, S. C.

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Rose D. Workman

Charleston, S. C.

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Dec. 30, 1938 THE STORY OF ELLEN.

It was a very shabby house that must have been brown "once upon a time," but the brass knocker was quite the shiniest I had ever seen. I almost hated to lift it, knowing my touch would dim its shining lustre.

Ellen opened the door, and in reply to my request for an interview, parted her lips in a friendly smile that showed fine, salt-white teeth in a tiny heart-shaped face.

"Give you an interview? Why, that would be delightful. Come right in!"

We sat down in a little parlor, with creamy walls and woodwork, and darkly-shining floors, all so clean and highly polished you saw yourself reflected everywhere. Through the doorway one caught a glimpse of a fine, mahogany staircase and paneled walls of the entrance hall, while dusky damask curtains parted slightly to reveal tall walnut bookcases in the study beyond.

I sat on a hard brown plush sofa. Ellen sat on an equally hard little chair. Like Ellen herself, the whole room gave an impression of austerity. But as the bright smile now and again lit up her small brunette face, so the gold colored muslin curtains lightened somewhat the severity of the room.

Large jars of evergreens stood in the open, otherwise empty fireplace, while from many wall vases graceful sprays of ivy trailed, intermixed with an occasional festoon of

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Above the severely beautiful, handcarved mantle hung a large oil painting in a massive gold leaf frame.

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"Great-grandfather James Parkhurst," she explained, catching my upward glance at the portrait. "Jamie, my nephew who lives with me, is the fifth James Parkhurst in direct descent."

That Ellen herself was a Parkhurst was plainly evident, for the same high forehead, with its crisp, upspringing dark hair, the same Roman nose, and thoughtful brown eyes of the portrait, were reproduced in miniature on the living, breathing canvas of Ellen.

"I love being interviewed," she began, "It makes me feel so distinguished. And I have always wanted to be distinguished.

"Ever since I can remember (and I am almost forty now), I have rebelled at having been born a woman. For a woman can't be distinguished. She has to be a lady.

"And if I had married," she went on gravely, "I would have been terribly disappointed if my children had been only mediocre. I'd have wanted them to be distinguished, too." She gave a gentle little sigh:

"Maybe it's just as well my engagement didn't turn out the way engagements should."-

"You'd like to know something about my engagement? Well-" her fine eyes took an a faraway look. "Looking back, it seems to me that I've gone through life rather vaguely. Although I've 3 always managed excel in mental things, until lately I never seemed to know exactly how this was to come about. I just wanted to be distinguished," she repeated musingly. "A being, rather than a doing. And yet, you have to do to be. —

"But about my engagement. I didn't go with boys very much, and I was just a little bashful. One night I was invited to a party. There was the usual group of medical students and high school girls who always went around together.

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"But there was a strange young man at the party that evening. He sat beside me. And when refreshments were served he wrote on the paper napkin:

"May I see you home?"

"And I just said, 'yes.'"

"Do you know, I was really much more attracted to the young man sitting on my other side than by the one who had asked to see me home. But in those days what could a young girl do? She went with the man who asked her, and the other man faded out of the picture.

"Almost before I knew it, I was engaged to the medical student who had taken me home that night. And for the four years of his college work, and the remaining years of my high school life, we went together constantly.

"I had a glorious time at school. I enjoyed it all tremendously. Our high school was then outstanding. It was a normal school, 4 too, and it took six years to complete the curriculum. We went out into the city schools and observed the methods of the best teachers and then put what we had learned into practice, so that by the time our graduation day finally arrived, we were really full-fledged teachers.

"But when I had graduated, there didn't seem to be any immediate plan of life for me. There wasn't any use for me to start teaching, for I was engaged to be married. So I just stayed at home and waited for my wedding day to come.

"That was the way girls did in those days," she explained.

"Oh, when I think of the wonderful use I would have made of these years had I lived just a little later! Youngsters growing up here today don't realize how fortunate they are in being able to go all the way from kindergarten through college without cost in Old Town. I wish

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I had had that opportunity when I was growing up! Girls couldn't go to First College then, you know.

“But I expect, even if they could have, it never would have occurred to me to go. I was thinking only of marriage and settling down, and raising my family of little Ellen and Tommy, James, and Junior.

“But our engagement didn't turn into marriage the way all good engagements should. I won't tell you about the quarrel ⁵ that altered all my life; only that at intervals he would come back and try to make it up again. But I had changed. I could never again have that first, blind faith, or that first, trusting love.

“Then through the years that followed, the Family circle was broken. Father died first. One brother married; then my sister did the same. Next God took my brother's wife away, and left a little son in her place. That little boy, Jamie, came to live with Mother, Brother and me, and became the sunshine of our lives. Then God called Mother. And after that; for a long time, Brother, Jamie and I lived together in this little house that I love so well.

“After a while brother became an invalid. He was sick for years before he died, and I nursed him, and tended the house, and cared for little Jamie, and made the few pennies Brother had managed to hold onto through the bank failures go as far as I could. Finally pennies got so scarce I started tutoring high school students to help out.

“I was thankful then for my teacher's training! At night I took courses at the college. Oh, do you know, I feel that I was a really worth while person then! But the world didn't think so. I was just little stay-at-home Ellen Parkhurst, and after a 6 while, Ellen Parkhurst, Spinster!

“Now that my name is in the paper every week, heading my column, and I'm invited to speak to the most select groups in the city, I'm in the limelight. People say to me:

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"Why haven't I met you before? Where have you been all this time that I've never seen you anywhere?"

"Naturally I don't go around explaining that I didn't have, nor have I now, the money it is necessary to possess in order to move within that circle of society to which my blood entitles me.

"My family? Well, Grandfather Parkhurst," she said looking up at the portrait over the mantle, "started the family in America. There's been a James Parkhurst in the family for five generations. On that side of the family we are of English and Dutch descent and have been in Old Town since the beginning of Old Town itself.

"On Mother's side my ancestors are English. One of them came over in the Mayflower, and settled in New England. Later the family came South.

"But after the war - I mean, of course, the War Between the States - our family seemed to go in for second marriages. I'm not the product of one of these, but one of its victims. This second marriage habit left us absolutely impoverished. What little we had managed to salvage from the wreck of war was eaten 7 up in the education and clothing of the little 'steps.'

"So when I was growing up, there wasn't any money for coming-out parties and dancing frocks for Sister and me. There was barely enough to send the Boys through college.

"But going back to the subject of family, as you see, I had as much right to make my formal debut as any girl in Old Town. But lack of money barred me from it.

"Not that I care. My two outstanding interests in life are my home and my work. I can be busy for hours at a time with an oil mop, one wall vase, and a spray of ivy. I'm perfectly happy polishing the floor and arranging my spray of ivy artistically.

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"Nothing means as much to me as staying at home and being with my books."

She paused a moment as if considering what to say next, and then remarked:

"Perhaps I should tell you how I happened to chose juvenile literature as my vocation.

"When Brother died, there was scarcely anything left except this house. About the only bill we didn't have to pay was rent.

"I managed to get a pupil or two, but still there wasn't enough to feed and clothe Jamie and me. He was still at college 8 then, and I wasn't willing to let him leave without getting his degree.

"I knew what it meant to be asked: 'What degrees do you hold, Miss Parkhurst?' For I had tried in vain to get a position to teach in the city schools. The Superintendent of Education had said to me in his fatherly manner - he had taught me Pedagogy and had read Shakespeare with me in my senior year at school:

"It isn't that you are not well educated, my Dear. It is merely that when almost every applicant for a teaching position today has not only one, but several degrees, you are overwhelmingly outclassed. You haven't a chance to break into the teaching profession.'

"So in desperation I tried the ERA. They had just began a project for increasing interest in reading among children, and I was assigned to work on it. Out of that ERA job grew my real life work.

"Lack of a degree was, of course, again a stumbling block in securing a permanent position in the literary field in which I found myself. But I worked very hard and did my level best on every task that I was given, and at the end of two years I received my appointment on the regular staff of the institution in which I work today.

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"So completely happy am I in my work, that so far as work itself is concerned, I can ask for nothing better in life. But I hope that eventually my salary will be raised to one hundred dollars a month. I feel that I could live very comfortably on that sum in Old Town. I'm making \$80 now.

"No, I don't let Jamie spend his money in the house," she said. "I want him to save as much of the \$75 he makes as collection clerk in a down-town bank, as he can," she went on to explain, "for I think that saving is a good habit for a young man to form.

"And of course, he has his personal expenses to meet. He buys his own clothes, and pays for his lunches, and any other meals that he gets down town. And of course, he has to have money to take his girl to dances and shows, and buy her flowers and candy occasionally.

"What do I do for amusement? Well, as I said, I find so much happiness in my work, that I really need very little outside pleasure, but I do get invitations sometimes.

"The other day a cousin called me on the phone and invited me to an oyster supper with the family at a fashionable restaurant that night. But. oh, it was so cold! "Here Ellen drew up her delicate shoulders in a realistic characterization of someone having a hard chill. "I thought of my nice, warm fire, and the lovely first editions of children's stories that had come in that day.

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I thanked Celie for the invitation, but made an excuse and hung up.

"The girl at the next desk was watching me queerly. I asked her what was the matter.

'Why don't you go, Ellen?' she asked.

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I told her about the wonderful evening I was looking forward to, curled up before the fire in my room, reading my children's stories, and she looked at me still more oddly, shook her head, and remarked:

'We're all in ruts here.' And that was the end of that conversation. But I stayed at home, and the books were much more enjoyable than oysters would have been. And if it is a rut, it is a nice rut, and I like being in it!

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you what I really love best of all. The Poetry Society! We hear some splendid lectures there, you know. I liked Padraic Colum best of all last year. And the Little Theatre Group - I belong to that too. And I simply adore the beautiful music of the Stringed Symphony.

"People in Old Town are lucky," she added enthusiastically. "We have so many opportunities for culture. I try to take advantage of as many of them as I can. But often I'm very tired when night comes. So tired sometimes that I draw the curtains and don't open the door if anyone knocks!

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"I never discuss politics," said Ellen, changing the subject abruptly. "But I will say that I vote according to my convictions. That is a point upon which I feel very strongly," she continued, setting her lips in a thin, straight line. "I vote for the man, and not for the party. Indeed, I bolted the Democratic ticket once, and voted for Hoover against Al Smith.

"I haven't the slightest idea how Jamie votes," she added. "I've never questioned him on the subject.

"What would I like best in life? Well, if I have to make a statement just at this moment I would say to have someone to love me, and belong to me entirely. I don't mean a man- if Jamie were, say thirteen, he would fill the bill. But he isn't thirteen. He's twenty-three. He's just as sweet as he can be, but he has a different life altogether from mine. He belongs to

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the young life of the city. I want somebody to belong entirely to me - someone I can think for, and plan for, and work for.

"Well, yes, I do work for Jamie. As I said, he's so sweet, I love to wait on him. But before we talk any more, suppose we have a cup of tea. We can chat so cozily over the teacups."

Soon we were sipping our steaming cups of delicate fragrant Chinese tea from fragile egg-shell china cups that had once been Ellen's grandmother's.

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"The tea is a gift," said Ellen, in her straightforward manner. "I can't afford to buy this kind for myself. But, oh, I love it!"-

"Give you a sample of how I spend my days? Why, yes, I'd like that. I get up at 6:30 - unless I oversleep - Say it's summertime. I get my coffee and toast, and maybe eat a banana. Then I put on the hominy to cook for Jamie's breakfast. While it's cooking I go outside and sweep and rake the garden and polish the brass knocker. By the way, did you notice my knocker as you came in?" she interrupted herself to ask with her eager, glancing smile. "That's my one grand claim to gentility.

"Then I come in, and go upstairs and study for about twenty minutes - that's the time I put in on my own work, writing. You didn't know I wrote? Well, I do, a little, and hope to do more some day. I've had one article published by a really outstanding literary magazine. You won't think I'm boasting? And I'm planning another that I hope they will accept.

"But to go back to my day. Next I feed my dogs, Dick and Dolly. Maybe you'd like to see them?"

Disappearing with her last word, in a moment she returned accompanied by two small, stout dogs, who, leaping upon her, 13 literally showered her with caresses. Ellen is a

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slender wand of a girl. The dogs were like fat, greedy old ladies, with little ruffs of fat around their chubby chins. Ellen fondled them for a moment in silence.

"When I got back from a course at Columbia University last summer," she continued, "I found Dick sick. He was paralyzed the night after I got home, and Jamie and I sat up working over him one whole night. But he's all right now," she said. Then she went on to tell of the next event in her dally routine - the serving of Jamie's breakfast. After he has left for the bank Ellen thoroughly cleans the hall, for as she quaintly remarked: "Those first impressions are everything."

Next she makes the beds -

"And then I go to work, carrying a pint bottle of milk and two pieces of zwiebach in a little box, for Dr. Green says milk is necessary. If I don't drink milk every day my teeth won't hold out," said Ellen.

"I work in the children's department of a large, cultural institution," she went on, "and there I toil until one o'clock, only stopping to drink my milk and munch my zwiebach. Then I have an hour off for dinner. I rush home, open a can of either Heins or Campbell's Soup, and drink a cup of tea.

"I lie down for ten minutes before I go back to the office 14 again, to work until six, when I hurry home and prepare and serve the real meal of the day. I open a couple of cans of vegetables, and perhaps another can of soup, slice some bread, and broil a steak.

"It's hard when one has to earn one's living and keep house both," she remarked, "but one simply has to manage the best one can.

"I drink about a quart of milk a day, too, so I'm sure that I get the proper nourishment.

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"After supper I wash the dishes. Jamie goes out about eight, usually to see his girl, and I go to my room and read or write for an hour or two.

"And then," said Ellen, like a good child, "I wash my face, and brush my teeth, say my prayers, and go to bed.

"My principal drawback, "Ellen went on, "is getting tired so easily. When night comes I'm simply exhausted. And it's hard to do creative work when you're all worn out. You have to be fresh to think well.

"But I haven't been sick enough to stay in bed for years," she continued, "So I expect I'm pretty lucky after all. My eyesight almost failed me last winter, though, and my bifocal glasses cost twenty-five dollars just at a time when I was saving every penny to go to summer school.

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"Yes, I manage to save a little," she said. "Every month I put aside ten dollars for a Baby Bond. I saved enough to go to Columbia University," she boasted, "in spite of buying my glasses."

"But going back to the way I spend my day," Ellen took up the story again, "Sundays are a little different. On Sunday I stay in bed until seven; then I straighten the house and prepare dinner, and carry Jamie his breakfast upstairs. If I take it to him, he eats every scrape, but if he comes down to the table, he just nibbles a bite or two, and dashes off.

"So I take him up the paper, dress, and rush off to Sunday School. I teach fifteen boys between ten and twelve years old, and they're all live wires. Then I come home and finish preparing dinner, which is really a well-balanced, and well cooked meal. Jamie and I both look forward to Sunday dinner all the week through.

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"Sunday afternoons vary. Sometimes friends come in, and we have a cup of tea, just as we're doing now. I love that best. Sometimes, though not often, I go out. Or I take a long nap, and read or write then I wake up. Supper, and church again in the evening.

"Church work? No, only my Sunday School class. But I can assure you that it alone takes up most of my leisure time preparing 16 lessons that will be interesting as well as instructive. I always give Saturday evenings to this work.

"I consider that gambling and drinking are dangerous for young men," she went on gravely. "I condemn them both very bitterly. I sometimes trouble for young James. But all that I can do is to let him go, and pray God to take care of him." -

"Yes, I suppose I do lead a strenuous life. But I don't have a maid, because I'm saving up to repair the little home. It needs a new kitchen for one thing, and a fresh coat of paint.

"Let me tell you something funny! For years and years I've been paying storm insurance on this place. Then when the tornado came it could so easily have done a little damage to the house. It even could have blown the kitchen off entirely. It wouldn't have mattered at all, if it had chosen some moment when I wasn't in it. Then I could have built one of those splendid modern kitchens with the insurance money. But no! I keep on paying insurance, and nothing ever happens!

"Now I want to say one more thing, and I expect that will be about all of my story." Ellen was speaking with deep gravity now.

"Since I've started working and writing, I have at least learned what my ambition is in life. It is to write a book, a really beautifully written children's book, similar to 'Little